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ABSTRACT

Productive changes in schooling throughout the 1980s are contingent on emphasis being placed on school effectiveness rather than on curriculum adjustments. Today's curriculum sprawl, caused by the state and federal legislatures' penchant for creating courses to cure newly-emerging social ills, must not deplete resources that should be directed toward basic education. Our country may be ready for a mobilization similar to the one that followed the Soviet's launching of Sputnik. In addition to the marked lack of science education, deficiencies in literacy, foreign language, and social studies instruction make the case for basic education stronger than ever. However, the definition and affirmation of standards will accomplish nothing unless they are linked to the school effectiveness movement. Successful schools are characterized by an emphasis on academic achievement, strong instructional leadership, clear expectations, regular academic testing, a serious academic climate, and parental reinforcement. Only when the incentives for learning become more powerful than the incentives for not learning can we anticipate genuine reform. (Author/JK)

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THE HIGH SCHOOL: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

Presented to The College Board National Forum by
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Council for Basic Education
in New York City

October 29, 1980

The program for the College Board's 1980 National Forum announces that "the secondary school curriculum is in another period of reform," and it says that Bill Spady, Scott Thomson and I will be talking about three questions:

- What are some of the challenging ideas and innovative developments taking place at the onset of the 1980s?
- Who are the provocative thinkers and what directions are the schools taking?
- Can quality and excellence survive in a time dominated by searching for basic competency?

As I begin to discuss at least a few parts of these large questions in my allotted twenty minutes, I will construe the phrase "secondary school curriculum" rather broadly. I mean to talk about reforms that are now underway in secondary schooling, obviously a more comprehensive subject than curriculum, which I take to be only one component of schooling.

My general thesis is this: there are promising signs that forthcoming reforms in secondary schooling will prove more substantive than decorative. By that I mean to say that there are solid grounds for hoping that schools will be able to rise to the challenge issued by Diane Ravitch:

> The schools must concentrate on doing well that which they are fitted to do best. The schools are the only community agency in which young people may gain a liberal education, an education that emphasizes intellectual growth and that prepares students to assume the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a free society. Even if nothing else were to change, the reordering of the schools' priorities would itself constitute an important reform in secondary education.[1]

Unhappily, that has not been so for the last ten or fifteen years, a period of great activity but dishearteningly few improvements in learning. Perhaps you have seen, for example, the National Science Foundation's recent report of how schools responded to NSF's study (published in 1978) of pre-college math, science and social studies. That study concluded that classroom teachers are prisoners of their textbooks and are usually not innovative in curriculum or instruction. Two years later, NSF wondered whether these complaints had led to any changes. Answer: no, and the conditions of teaching and learning are still considered unsatisfactory by all the people involved: teachers, students, administrators, school boards, and NSF.[2]

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As a nation, we seem to be diabolical in preventing schools from realizing the Ravitch dream. A principal source of devilment is curriculum sprawl. Today's high school curriculum has been damned as a smorgasbord; a patchwork; an accretion of watered-down requirements, flabby electives, and slapdash mini-courses; critics say it is altogether lacking in coherence and deficient in value for the purpose of general education.

A survey of high school principals by the National Institute of Education in 1977 revealed that in the preceding five years 35% of the schools sampled had increased the number of course requirements[3] and 64% had increased their offerings of electives.

This is a case of more equalling less: more for teachers and students to do means accomplishing less on each task. And when time is stolen from basic subjects--the subjects that are the building blocks of life-long learning--students are cheated.

Let's list some of the programs established by the Congress and administered by the Department of Education that add to the high school curriculum:

Law-related education	Ethnic heritage education
Vocational education	Energy education
Career education	Metric education
Alcohol & drug abuse educ.	Environmental education
Consumer education	

While acknowledging the praiseworthy goals of all these programs, it is right to question their importance relative to basic learning skills or to the basic subjects that all students should master because--whether they understand it or not as teenagers--they all will be life-long learners.

The Federal government is not the only culprit. Along with the Congress, state legislatures compete for the limited time of high school students. A study reported last year in Phi Kelta Kappan magazine illustrates the willingness of state legislators to weaken the power of schools to do anything well by compelling them to do too much.

PERCENT OF STATES WITH LEGISLATED SUBJECTS

Basic Subjects	Percent	Other Subjects	Percent
U.S. history	64	Alcohol and drugs	68
English	56	Physical education	66
Government	54	Health	58
Geography	40	Driver training	36
Mathematics	28	Morals	28
Science	24	Fire prevention	24
		Humane treatment of animals	22
Foreign languages	12	Agriculture, free enterprise, conservation, consumer education, vocational education, temperance, & venereal diseases	Under 20 but over 10
Arts	Under 10	First aid, sanitation, traffic safety, & Bird Day	Under 10

Source: Phi Delta Kappan, Oct. 1979

Plainly, both federal and state legislators share in the national penchant for inventing a new academic course to cure any freshly-discovered social ill.

The effect of legislative mandates is reinforced by considerable willingness among school people to embellish the curriculum in response to today's news. For example, just this month the National Association of Secondary School Principals reported on new trends in social studies, citing emphasis on citizenship education, global awareness, economics, and certain other subjects. Why this shift? Because, we are told, of political apathy, distrust of government, indifference to law, and ignorance of America's economic and political dependence on other nations.[4] In other words: we've got a problem; let's get the schools to solve it by inaugurating a new course. Ready as we are to make our schools the engines of social reform, we continue to deplete their capacity for basic education.

Thus, the last decade and a half of reform can be seen as a ruinous overloading of the high school curriculum in the vain expectation that new and socially useful learning would ensue. Why then am I optimistic about the reform of schooling for the 1980s?

First and foremost, because of the increasing force of the school effectiveness movement--the recognition that effective schools embody characteristics different from those of ineffective schools, that the factors that count for learning can be identified, understood, and replicated.

Let me put it another way. No amount of the usual tinkering with curriculum will produce better teaching and learning. Curriculum is the word for what we want students to learn; whether they learn it depends on whether their school is effective, not on what the curriculum is.

Researchers have discovered what makes an effective school. A good place to begin a review of these important findings is a book from England called Fifteen Thousand Hours by Michael Rutter and several colleagues.[5] Rutter reports on an eight-year study of twelve London secondary schools, proving that schools have a great effect on children and that it matters which school children attend. The proof that schools do make a difference contradicts the destructive nonsense that has ruled much educational thinking for fifteen years in the wake of Coleman and Jencks.

Rutter has counterparts in the United States. One is Ronald Edmonds, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and, until recently, Assistant for Instruction to Chancellor Macchiarola of the New York City public schools. New York last year began a pilot program in 10 schools to learn how the characteristics of effective schools can be implanted.[6] Similar programs are operating in other places.

Successful schools--those where all children learn--are cohesive social organizations having an ethos composed of six characteristics:

1. Pervasive emphasis on academic achievement, especially in the basic subjects.
2. Strong instructional leadership by the principal. (not administrative, or athletic or whatever)
3. Clear expectations that all can and will learn.
4. Regular academic testing to measure progress and modify instruction
5. A school climate that fosters serious attention to learning.
6. Reinforcement from parents and other citizens.

Judging by articles already in print, the conclusions of Rutter and Edmonds will be confirmed by John Goodlad's Study of Schooling, to be published in 1981. The findings of these social scientists will help concentrate school reform efforts on matters that count for better academic achievement and student behavior. Conversely, their work suggests that many of the resources commonly poured into schools are destined to have no beneficial effect on learning.

What I would like you to remember from my remarks today is the encouraging news that the school effectiveness movement has produced research results that corroborate our common sense understanding of how schools work.

My second reason for being hopeful that the 1980s will bring substantial reforms to high schools derives from a rising consciousness, nationwide, that the need for improvement is urgent.

Causes for action are legion:

- Steadily dropping test scores
- Declining enrollment
- Financial austerity
- Worrisome dropout patterns
- Intolerable levels of illiteracy among high school graduates
- Depleted programs in science and mathematics
- Incompetent writing
- Enervated courses in the humanities and in social studies
- Concerns about the quality of teaching

Clark Kerr sums up the feelings of most Americans when he reports that both the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education and its successor Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education underestimated "the degree of deterioration of the American high school and of the qualifications of students entering college."[8]

The country is almost ready, I think, for another mobilization like the one that followed Sputnik over twenty years ago. The forthcoming November issue of Basic Education, the bulletin of the Council for Basic Education states:

Since the mid-1960s the Soviets have brought about changes tantamount "to an educational mobilization of the entire population." Whereas in 1957 (the year of Sputnik) fewer than 2 million students completed secondary school, in 1978 the number exceeded 5 million, representing a "success rate" of 98 percent, compared with a rate of about 75 percent in the United States. Comparisons of mathematics and science curricula are devasting. By the time they complete eighth grade, students in the USSR have had eight years of mathematics, and when they finish school all 5 million have evidently had two years of calculus. In 1976, 105,000 United States high school students graduated with one year of calculus. In the USSR, all students take five years of physics, four years of chemistry, one year of astronomy, and five years of biology. In the USA, nine percent take one year of physics, 16 percent one year of chemistry, and 45 percent one year of biology.

Whatever implications they may have for the national security, such comparisons serve to put in bold relief the very limited accommodation American education makes for the science and technology that have become central elements in today's culture. Obviously American schools cannot force science and mathematics down students' throats as the Soviets apparently can, nor is it by any means clear that all American students ought to have as much as the Soviets are determined their students shall have. What does seem patently clear is that most American young people ought to have substantially more than they are now having in school.

Add this deficiency to the condition of American literacy, the nation's appalling ignorance of foreign languages, and the ineffectual muddle of the social studies, and the case for basic education is stronger than it has ever been. If this country hopes or expects to bring up a generation of young people competent to hold their own in the 21st century--or even in what remains of the 20th--the schools must meet these conditions.

Widespread dissatisfaction has prompted initiatives that we should track carefully through the 1980s.

The oldest of these is the phenomenon of minimum competency testing, which has not yet reached maturity and thus bears careful watching. The unanswered question is what will we do with the test results--punish students judged incompetent or change schools to assure that all become competent?

If I needed a reminder of this looming issue, I received it from my local newspapers. In early October, The Washington Post reported that my local school district (Arlington, VA) had experienced an increase in SAT scores and is comfortably above not only the national norms but also the more publicized districts of Fairfax County, VA and Montgomery County, MD.[9] Two weeks earlier, The Arlington Journal reported some dismaying news about that same senior class: "Twenty percent of Arlington's high school seniors will not graduate this spring unless they pass tests that most of them already have failed two or three times."[10] The tests, of course, are minimum competency tests, and there is probably no overlap between the two groups of test-takers--SAT and MCT. But the juxtaposition of these two news items illustrates part of the reform agenda for the 1980s: Making schools effective for all students, not just one group like the college-bound.

We should also be attentive to what flows from the Rockefeller Commission's report on The Humanities in American Life, which declares that our highest educational priority for the 1980s should be "a dramatic improvement in the quality" of elementary and secondary schools.[11] We can expect, I presume, like-sounding manifestos from two other major studies of high schools just underway: one announced by Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a second by Stephen Bailey, President of the National Academy of Education. And there are indications that the College Board will mount a related effort. What all these projects have in common, apparently, is a serious concern for educational quality and a conviction that high schools, working in concert with colleges, can be turned around, especially if they rally to the idea of John Henry Martin that "the time has come to agree upon a more circumspect and modest set of aims for the American high school."[12] The liberal consensus that defined the mission of public schooling for two decades has collapsed. We need a new coalition and a new mission. Without them, schooling soon will be reduced to little more than a triage--a system for sorting the casualties of education.

My optimism about what I judge to be constructive (if long overdue) responses to the condition of high schools is tempered by certainty that nothing good will come of all this unless the work of these new groups is intellectually linked to the school effectiveness movement. The definition and affirmation of standards alone will not accomplish much.

As I pointed out earlier, Rutter, Edmonds, Goodlad and company have shown that schools produce exactly the effects they are designed to produce. This is a thoroughly unpleasant idea, I recognize. Schools, as all social organizations, have built-in incentives for behavior, behavior that leads eventually to excellence or mediocrity or failure in learning. A new curriculum has no more to do with excellence in learning than fresh wallpaper has to do with the strength and energy efficiency of a house. Only when the incentives for learning become more powerful than the incentives for not learning can we anticipate genuine reform. The research on schools effects says it can be done. What we don't know yet is whether we as a nation have the will.

You members of The College Board should lead; if you do, then the prospects for change in American high schools can be realized.

NOTES

1. Diane Ravitch (in a response to John Henry Martin's "Reconsidering the Goals of High School Education"), Educational Leadership, January 1980.

2. Education USA, October 13, 1980.

3. High School '77 (NIE, 1978).

4. "Social Studies: A Look Ahead," NASSP Curriculum Report, October 1980.

5. Michael Rutter et al, Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children, (Harvard University Press, 1979). See Pediatrics, Vol. 65, No. 2, February 1980, pp. 208-220 for an excellent summary by Rutter.

6. Ronald Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," Educational Leadership, October, 1979.

7. John Goodlad, "A Conversation with John Goodlad," Educational Leadership, December 1979; also "How Fares the Common School?" Today's Education, April-May 1980.

8. "High Expectations, Partial Reforms," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 29, 1980.

9. "SAT Scores Up in Most Area Schools," The Washington Post, October 5, 1980.

10. "One-Fifth of Seniors Could Fail," The Arlington Journal, September 17, 1980.

11. The Humanities in American Life (University of California Press, 1980).

12. John Henry Martin, "Reconsidering the Goals of High School Education," Educational Leadership, January 1980.